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GPS technology helps guide the wired traveller

JIM CARROLL
DIGITAL SURVIVOR

A few weeks ago, I travelled to Chicago to deliver a speech. Upon arrival at O'Hare Airport, I hopped in the cab and told the driver where I wanted to go. My hotel was located about 15 minutes to the north of O'Hare, but I immediately figured out that the driver was going the wrong way.

After 10 minutes of insisting that he didn't know where he was going, I demanded that he let me out and hopped in another cab. The good news: This fellow knew where my hotel was. The bad news: He proceeded to get lost on the way there.

An hour and a half later, infuriated at both drivers' ineptitude, I finally ended up at my destination. At that point, I decided it was time to get myself wired for travel.

I bought a HandSpring Visor (**www.handspring.com**), a competitor to the Palm Pilot, and the DeLorme StreetAtlas Road Warrior edition (**www.delorme.com**). The latter is specialized street mapping software that comes with a global positioning system (GPS) receiver.

The GPS satellite works with the DeLorme software to show you on a map exactly where you are. Now, prior to a trip to the United States, I load my Visor with detailed city maps.

Then, in the back of the cab, I can turn on the Visor with the attached GPS and see an immediate, real-time, satellite-linked map of my location. The map changes as we travel, so I can follow the route on my screen to make sure cabbies know where they're going.

This is but one small revolution that GPS is bringing to the world around us. It is not a new technology, and is familiar to many. Consider boaters — a lot of pleasure crafts now feature GPS as standard equipment.

Yet for many people, the wonders of GPS are still a mystery. That's why if you want to get an understanding of the wired world, consider using Hertz Corp. the next time you need a rental car. Make sure you ask for the company's NeverLost system; it's available in Toronto, Calgary, Montreal and Vancouver, and will appear in other cities.

NeverLost is a small computer screen, with about four buttons, that is attached to the dash. You start out by choosing your destination from a series of menus. You'll find listed major hotels, attractions, highways, landmarks or other details that you can select. As you travel, you'll see an interactive map display on the screen that changes according to your progress.

You'll also be told, through voice commands, when to expect a turn or change in direction, by a rather pleasant, computer synthesized voice. I've used the system a few times, and it works like a charm.

As with any technology, there is a downside, with the all too obvious safety risk of being distracted while driving. Not to mention that such technology can take some magic out of travel. After all, what's wrong with getting lost once in a while?

Jim Carroll is co-author of Light Bulbs to Yottabits: How to Profit by Understanding the Internet of the Future. *Readers can send e-mail to: jcarroll@jimcarroll.com*